

# LIVING

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## A dream in the steam



Although the mill is set up to cut large, long logs, nothing is wasted. Massive structural timbers are its specialty, but the sawyer maps out the cut to get products all the way down to spindly 2-by-2s.

The owner of a vintage mill wants to make it a working museum — with a caveat

By CARMEL FINLEY  
Correspondent, The Oregonian

**M**ONROE — For 62 years, Ralph Hull has kept timber flowing to his mill on the east side of the Coast Range. Through boom times and depressions, falling lumber prices and escalating environmental wars, the Hull-Oakes Lumber Co. has seldom missed a shift. "Arbitrary and paternalistic" is the way his friend and retired sales manager Wayne Giesy describes his former boss. The mill was powered by steam when Hull built it; it's powered by steam today.

He built it to cut big timber into industrial beams for docks, piers and big buildings. That's what it cuts today.

His office is filled with the sound of adding machines; "Mr. Hull doesn't believe in computers," Giesy said.

But he does believe in keeping his 85 employees working, and he's come up with a novel way to do it: He wants to turn his mill into a working museum.

Hull wants the federal government to guarantee his company the right to buy timber from 250 acres of land each year, to keep the museum working and his people employed.

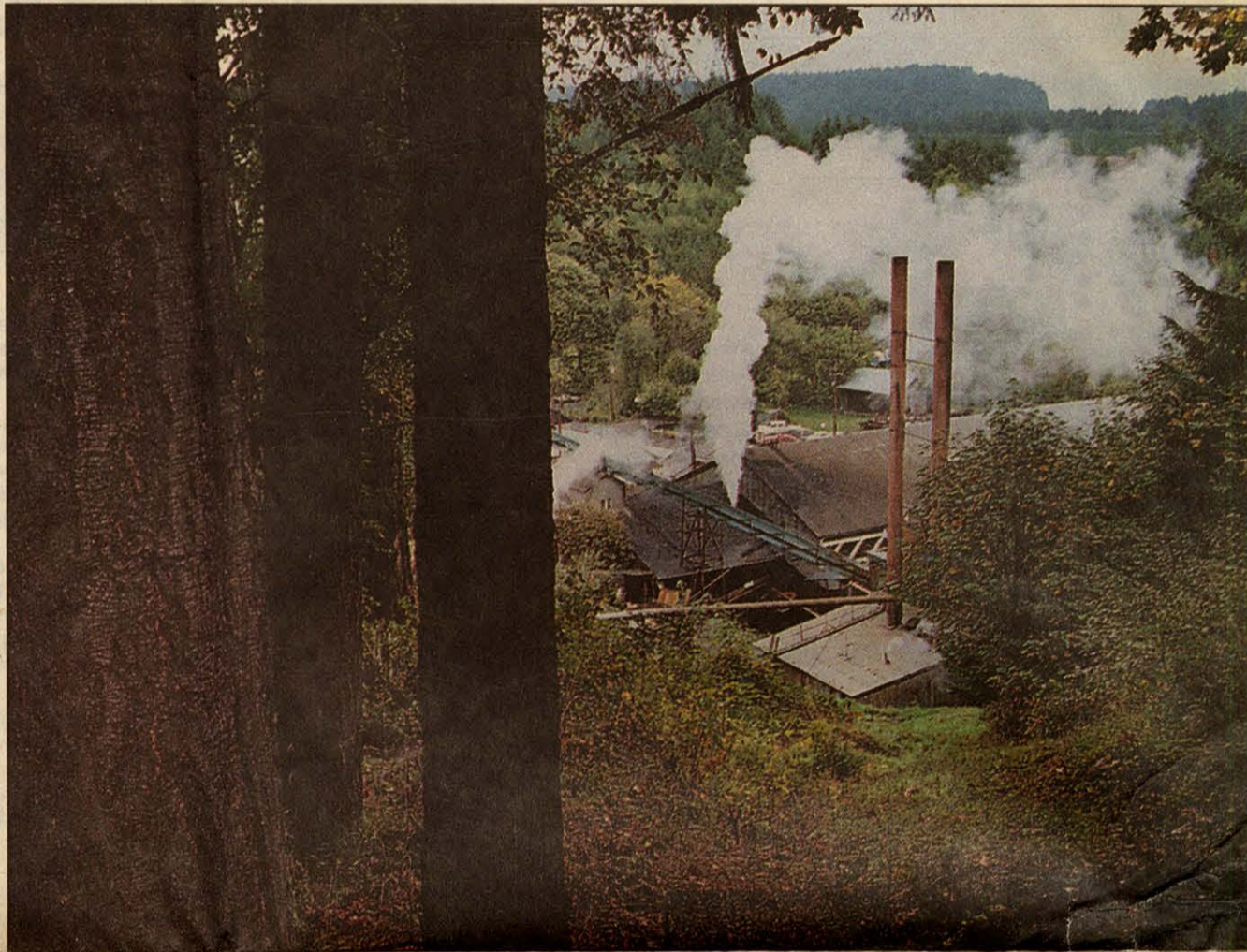
"We're so old-fashioned, we've become newsworthy," Hull said dryly during a recent interview. At 84, he walks each day from his small brown house across the yard to the mill's office.

He and his mill are at the tail-end of a road, at the tail-end of a railroad line, in the 2,900-foot shadow of Green Peak. There's a two-acre log pond, a series of metal buildings and a storage yard. During the week-day, the view of the firs on the hilltop is obscured by billows of white steam.

The mill is about 20 miles southeast of Corvallis, at a spot called Dawson that you can't find on most maps. Dawson is a shipping point on the Southern Pacific rail line; the company ships timber from Dawson to Montreal, and from Dawson to San Francisco.

It is the last steam-powered sawmill in Oregon, and perhaps in the nation. Last year, the National Park Service placed it on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Historic American Engineering Record, a Park Service division that documents historically significant industrial sites, wants to study the mill and make the construction drawings part of its national collection at the Library of



Several workers are needed to periodically replace and align the big blade that cuts through 18 million board feet of lumber, mostly Douglas fir, each year.



Above: For 62 years, the Hull-Oakes mill has kept the valley humming near Monroe. Left: Mike Wiard attaches a hook to a log raft to keep it tight against a gathering machine in the mill's log pond. Logs are trucked to the mill from sites in the Coast Range.

Photos by  
**ROBERT KAISER**  
for The Oregonian

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**MILL, Page E10**

# Mill: Protests drew national attention

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Congress.

"We are particularly interested in the Northwestern lumber industry, because what little remains of early-20th century lumber mills are threatened by fire, neglect and by more advanced cutting technologies," wrote Eric N. DeLony, head of the engineering record. "From my visit, the site appeared to have remarkable integrity."

If the timber supply is ensured, the company will build an elevated walkway, an elevator and an interpretive center. Giesy thinks they could attract 1,000 people a month. "We want the privilege of buying the timber at market value," said Giesy, who works as a consultant to the company. "We're not looking for a gift. If this mill shut down for six months to a year, it will never reopen again. Nobody could afford the cost to reopen it."

As it is, the visitors come on a regular basis, from all over the country and all over the world.

When Giesy does the tour, he stops to shake hands and introduce each employee. He starts with the log pond, where an operator is using a small boat to pull three big logs into position to go through the debarker. The air is sharp with the smell of resin and freshly cut wood.

The heart of the mill is the 1906-era steam engine, with its massive cowhide belt, powering the big headrig and edging saws above it. The chips fall onto a conveyor belt that runs to the boiler room, where John Bell has been stoking two boilers.

Bell needs between 140 to 150 pounds of steam to power the mill, and he gets it by firing the boilers to between 1,800 and 2,300 degrees. The heat moves through a series of tubes covered with water, creating the steam that moves through pipes to the engine, turning the cowhide belts.

The steam powers the headrig and the edger; a second steam engine powers the carriage saw. While a modern mill would have an eye beam or a laser to tell the saw operation how to cut, at Hull-Oakes, "It's all here," Giesy says, tapping one eye.

Most of the workers have been there for years. For some, jobs have passed through generations.

Ralph Hull built the mill to run on steam because there wasn't enough electricity in the 1930s to power the machinery. In the 1960s, he converted some parts of the mill to electricity; he was going to convert the whole thing, but the power rates quadrupled, and he backed off.

Hull considered automation in the 1980s. "This mill is designed to cut large and long timber," Hull said. "The operation is necessarily slow. The logs are longer and bigger. It could have been put in here, but it would have been very expensive. You can do a lot of things if you want to be foolish enough to spend the money."

The mill cuts mostly Douglas fir. Big Douglas fir — but not necessarily old growth timber. Most of the

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**Eric N. DeLony,**

Historic American Engineering Record

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timber is second-growth, about 90 to 100 years old, said Todd Nystrom, Hull's grandson.

"This is not the Auschwitz for old growth," Nystrom said. But during the past year, Hull-Oakes was at the center of a dispute with environmentalists over three units of timber it bought at nearby Tobe Creek on the South Fork of the Alsea River.

One protest drew 500 people. There were weekend vigils, two dozen arrests, a march through the cutting area and a segment on the national television program "60 Minutes." Correspondent Ed Bradley signed the Hull-Oakes guest book.

The company got about two-thirds of the Tobe Creek timber. The 5.5 million board feet will last the mill about six months.

Hull-Oakes needs about 18 million board feet of logs a year, Giesy said. The mill buys about a quarter of it from private lands but wants to be able to buy the rest from the state and from the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. That would amount to about 12 million feet of lumber a year, about what could be harvested from 250 acres.

Most of it would be second-growth. Giesy maintains there is not much old growth left in the Coast Range, thanks to a massive fire that swept the area about 170 years ago.

Come January, Giesy will seek congressional support for an amendment that would authorize the sale of enough timber to keep the mill running. The idea of a working museum at the Hull-Oakes mill has caught the attention of Rep. Peter DeFazio, who visited the site. The concept is intriguing and "something that he feels would merit a hearing in the next session; it's definitely something to explore," said Jeff Stier, a spokesman for the congressman.

In the meantime, the 85 workers show up Monday through Friday, and the boilers are never allowed to go out. "We'll keep going as long as we can," Nystrom said. "One day at a time."